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SUBJECT: YOUTH VIOLENCE FEARED DURING ELECTIONS

REF: ABIDJAN 675

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY POLECON COUNSELOR MARY TOWNSWICK
FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: International NGOs working on election issues, as well as Ivoirian civil society institutions are concerned about the potential for violence in the run up to elections, particularly among impoverished and unemployed youth, who have attached their economic hopes to their respective candidates. They recommend sensitization programs on peaceful elections for both party leadership and their young followers. With elections officially postponed from November 29, we believe a USG statement calling for elections as soon as possible and urging leaders to publicly renounce the use of violence to protect the credibility of the process could be helpful. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) In spite of the official announcement of a delay in the presidential elections, progress continues to be made, with the provisional electoral list now on the internet and expected to be posted at all polling places during the week of November 16. A four-week contestation period (contentieux) will commence once the list has been posted nationwide. International NGO's, as well as members of political parties and civil society are concerned about the possibility of violence, particularly by young people, as the electoral process moves into higher gear. At a roundtable sponsored by the Embassy on November 10, representatives of 12 Ivoirian human rights organizations expressed concern about the youth wings of all political parties. With youth unemployment estimated at over 60 percent, many see little opportunity for economic advancement except through political patronage from "their" candidate who will, of course, win the election. In addition, it is easy to attract large groups into the streets by paying them fairly small sums. Disturbingly, one NGO rep noted that young people admire wealthy officials, despite them being extremely corrupt. With little confidence in governmental institutions, many youth seem to believe that "seule la lutte paie (only struggle pays)."

¶3. (C) All major political leaders assure their followers that their party will win. (For example, in Divo and Yamoussoukro, local officials of all three parties steadfastly maintained to emboffs that their candidate would carry the region by a large margin.) While this can be dismissed as part of the campaign process, one result could well be that supporters of the losing candidates will be taken by surprise and believe that the outcome was unfair. The NDI country representative told us he was concerned by the high level of hate-filled rhetoric from all parties, in particular from the PDCI, and planned to arrange a round table with the youth leaders to discuss ways to have a peaceful election. Another NGO involved in elections told us that the RDR has admitted that its youth wing will be very difficult to control. In a November 12 meeting, Ambassador asked PDCI Secretary General Djedje Mady to discourage party members from using violence. His response was that if the Young Patriots take to the streets, the PDCI youth wing will respond in kind.

¶4. (SBU) There are several sensitive stages in the electoral process. The time allotted for contesting names on the list must be handled well, according to one NGO rep, as the question of national identity is particularly inflammatory. A Carter Center representative believes that

most problems will arise in the aftermath of the election, as it would be fairly easy to disrupt the tabulation process.

¶5. (C) Comment: The strong arm tactics used by the pro-FPI Young Patriots since 2002 have driven other political parties to allow their youth wings to develop a similar capacity for violence. Local NGOs are clearly worried about the potential for violence to disrupt the elections and tarnish the results. Now that the election has officially been postponed, we believe the time is right for the U.S. to make a public statement reiterating our view that elections need to take place as soon as possible and calling on political party leaders to renounce the use of violence to ensure a credible process.

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